

Sick

I'm sorry I haven't been keeping up with Bubble City. I've spent a lot of the last few weeks lying in bed and drinking fluids. (With occasional breaks to play Rock Band, much to the annoyance of my neighbors.) Once again, I've been sick — this time, with four different illnesses.

I have a lot of illnesses. I don't talk about it much, for a variety of reasons. I feel ashamed to have an illness. (It sounds absurd, but there still is an enormous stigma around being sick.) I don't want to use being ill as an excuse. (Although I sometimes wonder how much more productive I'd be if I wasn't so sick.) And, to a large extent, I just don't find it an interesting subject. (My friends are amazed by this; why is such a curious person so uncurious about the things so directly affecting his life?)

One of my goals for this blog is to describe what it's like to be in various situations and it struck me that I've never said much about what it's like to be sick. So I figured I'd try to remedy that. (Unfortunately, being sick has made this slightly more difficult. I started this post on thanksgiving and now it's almost four days later.)

Cold: All the time I feel tired and woozy. My throat is sore and I'm constantly searching for kleenex to address my nose. Sometimes I feel too hot, like I'm burning up. I'm always thirsty. Concentrating on anything is difficult. I just feel kind of wasted.

Upset stomach: Huge pains grind through my stomach, like it's trying to leap out of my body. Food is always followed by pain, followed by running to the bathroom. I'm afraid to go out because I wouldn't want to get too far from a toilet. I'm always thirsty and the dehydration makes me angry and confused. At times the pain is excruciating and even after it goes I spend some time just reeling from it.

Migraine: Ever felt someone's nails dig into your scalp? Imagine that their nails are knives and they're scratching thru your brain and you can begin to imagine what a migraine feels like. Light, sound, touch — everything makes it worse, making the most painful pains even more painful. Even when you quell it with a pill, you still end up feeling woozy and disconnected, as if the pill is just barely keeping the pain at bay.

Depressed mood: Surely there have been times when you've been sad. Perhaps a loved one has abandoned you or a plan has gone horribly awry. Your face falls. Perhaps you cry. You feel worthless. You wonder whether it's worth going on. Everything you think about seems bleak — the things you've done, the things you hope to do, the people around you. You want to lie in bed and keep the lights off. Depressed mood is like that, only it doesn't come for any reason and it doesn't go for any either. Go outside and get some fresh air or cuddle with a loved one and you don't feel any better, only more upset at being unable to feel the joy that everyone else seems to feel. Everything gets colored by the sadness.

At best, you tell yourself that your thinking is irrational, that it is simply a mood disorder, that you should get on with your life. But sometimes that is worse. You feel as if streaks of pain are running through your head, you thrash your body, you search for some escape but find none. And this is one of the more moderate forms. [As George Scialabba put it](#), “acute depression does not feel like falling ill, it feels like being tortured ... the pain is not localized; it runs along every nerve, an unconsuming fire. ... Even though one knows better, one cannot believe that it will ever end, or that anyone else has ever felt anything like it.”

The economist Richard Layard, after advocating that the goal of public policy should be to maximize happiness, set out to learn what the greatest impediment to happiness was today. His conclusion: depression. Depression causes nearly half of all disability, it affects one in six, and explains more current unhappiness than poverty. And (important for public policy) Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy has a short-term success rate of 50%. Sadly, depression (like other mental illnesses, especially addiction) is not seen as “real” enough to deserve the investment and awareness of conditions like breast cancer (1 in 8) or AIDS (1 in 150). And there is, of course, the shame.

So I hope you'll forgive me for not doing more. And hey, it could be worse. At least I have decent health insurance.

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